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Press Release

[03M2709-3]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
23-November-2003

At approximately 8:28 PM Friday, a Piper PA-28-180 attending the California Wing, Civil Air Patrol, Search and Rescue Exercise, departed on a flight under Visual Flight Rules from the Palm Springs International Airport to Big Bear City Airport. The person believed to be the pilot-in-command was appropriately rated for the intended flight. The pilot did not file a flight plan with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

On Saturday morning, California Wing was notified that the aircraft and its two souls on board were overdue. At the time of notification, it was not clear that the aircraft reported or any of the occupants were Civil Air Patrol members or conducting a Civil Air Patrol authorized flight.

After some research and intelligence gathering, search operations began at approximately 12:00 PM on Saturday. Our efforts were assisted by the acquisition of terminal radar data (via the U.S. Air Force) that allowed us to plot the aircrafts location in space, analyze the ground track and make more accurate decisions about how to conduct a quick and effective search for the objective.

As with any search, California Wing and the local Sheriffs department, work closely together to conduct search operations. Indeed, many times the Sheriffs air units, specifically their helicopter resources, allow us the opportunity to gain quick access to locations that would take many hours by foot or 4-wheel drive vehicles thus delaying positive identification and notification.

At about sunset, working closely with California Wing Air and Ground personnel, San Bernardino County Sheriffs Department (SBCSD) helicopter 40 King was able to identify fresh wreckage consistent with the profile of the target aircraft. SBCSD subsequently notified the FAA, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and SB County Coroners office.

Civil Air Patrol Ground Teams arrived at the scene at approximately 09:45 PM last night and were able to identify the aircraft by its registration number. There were no survivors and the ground teams were unable to positively identify the occupants. Initial plans and coordination with SBCSD called for the Coroner to be on-scene at first light to accomplish the recovery.

The Chaplain of the Squadron the members belonged to performed the family notifications last night. Both families were aware that the persons were missing and that search operations had commenced. Given the nature of the loss, both families are doing as well as could be expected.

Investigators from the NTSB arrived at 0800 and our Ground Teams guided both the investigative team and the SBC Coroners to the scene. They are still on scene at this time. As such, the names of the occupants will be released by Civil Air Patrol or the San Bernardino County Coroner after positive identification has been made.

Given that California Wing has not lost any aircrew in over 6 years, the California Wing Commander, Col. Virginia Nelson, has directed the following actions take place.

1. All operations for the current Search and Rescue Exercise are now halted. Personnel will be able to return with their aircraft and vehicles to their home bases.
2. A Board of Investigators, comprised of three senior officers from California Wing and Pacific Region staff, has been appointed to do an internal investigation of the incident.

The Wing Commander emphasizes safety in all of our operations – air, ground and mission base – and considers it our highest priority. There is no mission so important that we cannot take the time to perform it safely. As such,

3. All units in California Wing will accomplish a safety stand down to focus on aircrew safety and operational procedures, in an attempt to help mitigate future incidents.

To the families, on this sad day, the members of California Wing and Civil Air Patrol are standing by you, our hearts go out to you and we offer our deepest sympathies for your tragic loss.

- 30 -

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